

Riding for Smiles

Report

Deprivation Group

December 2021

This group consisted of junior aged children with a variety of additional needs including learning delay, social and emotional problems and low self-esteem and confidence. They were all from deprived backgrounds and in receipt of free school meals. They were a very quiet thoughtful group who arrived at the first session nervous and hesitant but made good all round progress over the block of 6 weeks.

At the first session the group took part in a trek and a guided tour of the stable yard and surroundings. They listened well to information given on the rules, safety and horse information. They were willing to answer questions when asked but did not initiate much conversation. With adult support and encouragement they were all willing to go near the small pony and stroke him and were enthusiastic about the activities they were told they would take part in over the following weeks. They followed instructions carefully and mounted the ponies without fuss, although one child was very nervous. However, once on the pony all the children began to relax and returned to the yard smiling and not wanting to get off.

Over the following 6 weeks the group took part in a combination of treks and riding lessons. Some preferred the treks, enjoying the quietness of the surrounding area and the chance to relax, while others preferred the challenge of the lesson and the excitement of trotting. This group soon gained confidence in their riding ability and were so eager to partake that they sometimes needed reminding to

think carefully about the correct procedure and to wait for the instruction to be given. They always responded to instruction, however, without fuss. During the lessons they were all happy to take part in trotting and by the end of the 6 weeks some children had almost mastered the rising trot. A couple of the children asked for the same pony leaders each week, who they were beginning to form a bond with, and with whom they were happy to chat away to. Some members of the group were able to remember how to make the horse walk, trot, stop and turn and were eager to give an explanation to others or the riding instructor on what to do. Over the course of the 6 weeks these children became very proud of their riding achievements and their confidence was increased.

The group took part in a variety of stable yard activities, including grooming and leading the pony, cleaning a stable, hay net and water bucket filling and poo collecting. Although for a few weeks some children remained very quiet and reserved, they were happy to talk when spoken to and used good thinking skills when answering questions. As their confidence increased and they became more familiar with the staff and the routines they began to initiate conversation and ask thoughtful questions independently (eg How do horses sleep? How fast can horses run? Why do they wear rugs? How many poos do they do in one day? How can you tell what a horse is saying?) This often led onto other activities, such as looking at the different kind of rugs, naming body parts and reading non- verbal body signs. With adult support and encouragement this group were able to work well together as a team when performing certain tasks such as cleaning a stable. During a couple of sessions they played a game where they gave each other instructions on how to perform the task correctly (leading a pony and using a poo scoop). This gave them a great opportunity to practise and develop their language skills and check their understanding and knowledge.

Over the period of 6 weeks many objectives had been reached. The members of this group had grown in confidence and self-esteem. They had pushed themselves out of their comfort zones and achieved new skills, having taken part in a new sporting activity. They had also learned many new facts and had their horizons widened. They had practised and developed language and social skills and learned how to work as a team. They left after their last sessions sad that the experience had ended but happy and grateful that they had had a chance to take part.